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## **Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford**

### **Abstract**

Minnie Cunningham (1870-1954) was a British music hall star and actress whose career spanned nearly forty years. Today she is primarily remembered through paintings made of her by the prominent British artist Walter Sickert (1860-1942) in the early 1890s. Despite her popularity, Cunningham has mostly been overlooked in music hall and theatre histories. Instead, the limited information that is available about her today comes to us primarily through art history scholarship on Sickert. To fill this gap, this paper offers the first scholarly account of Cunningham by drawing together press notices, published interviews, and other artefacts from her long career. This introduction to Cunningham is framed by a discussion of the unevenness of the cultural transactions taking place between these artists – between the ‘higher’ arts practice of modern painting and the perceived ‘lower’ music hall. I consider how this imbalance played out at the time these artists worked and the impact this has had in the preservation (or lack thereof) of their artistic practices.

Keywords: Music Hall, Minnie Cunningham, Walter Sickert, Popular Culture, Popular Music

*Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford* (Fig. 1) is one of six artworks produced from a single sitting British music-hall star Minnie Cunningham agreed to give artist Walter Sickert in the spring of 1892.<sup>1</sup> It was first exhibited at the New English Art Club’s winter show in London in the same year and has gone on to become one of the artist’s most recognised paintings.

Sickert was a post-Impressionist painter and one of the founders of the modern art society the London Group, as well as one of its predecessors, the Camden Town Group. His life and artistic career have been carefully poured over and analysed since his death in 1942, resulting in a significant body of scholarly literature about the artist and his body of work. However, the same cannot be said of Cunningham. Despite a nearly forty-year-long career on stage and achieving celebrity status across the United Kingdom and Ireland in the late nineteenth century, little is known about the former star today. How is it that two artistic labourers – both highly regarded and well known in their own time – could be remembered (or forgotten) so differently? This article asks: Who is Minnie Cunningham? What was it that drew audiences and, in this case, an artist to her? I will address these questions in three sections. In the first, I provide critical context and consider the cultural value systems, and biases, that

produce unbalanced forms of artistic appreciation, which I argue is in some ways responsible for the lack of information available on Cunningham. In the second section, I begin the work of recuperating the forgotten career of Minnie Cunningham. Drawing primarily on reviews, published interviews, advertisements and sheet music, I sketch out a broad chronology of her life and career as a performer. I have chosen for this section to remain biographical and narrative in style because no other biographies of Cunningham currently exist; I believe it is important, therefore, to give her story – as incomplete as it may be – uninterrupted focus. In the final part, I return to the questions of artistic value and elaborate on the disparity in the historical record between these two significant artists and the ways in which their careers have been remembered.

### **I. Vulgar and Refined**

In the late 1880s, the young painter Walter Sickert (1860-1942) turned his attention to popular British entertainments as subject matter for his art. He was particularly taken with circuses and music halls. While a precedent for painting theatrical scenes had already been established by other British artists, Sickert was treading into relatively uncharted waters with his paintings of less respectable ‘popular’ performance forms like music hall.<sup>2</sup> In France, Edgar Degas (1834-1917) may have popularised and made artistically acceptable similar locations of lower-class and mass leisure, including cabarets, cafes and circuses, in his art, but no such pioneers had yet paved the way in Britain. The critical response to Sickert’s painting, *Second Turn of Miss Katie Lawrence*, depicting music hall performer Katie Lawrence, in an exhibition with the New English Art Club in 1888 is telling: the work was branded ‘grotesque’ and ‘shocking’, leaving one critic openly questioning the appropriateness of the subject matter.<sup>3</sup> This would lead to a public debate, played out in the national press, about whether the music hall was a suitable subject for serious British artists.<sup>4</sup>

Popular entertainments in the nineteenth century had a strained relationship with the upper-middle and educated classes, particularly – but certainly not exclusively – in rigidly socially-stratified Victorian Britain. This was especially true of music halls, which would evolve from simple tavern sing-a-longs accommodating what is now believed to be a mixed, but probably working-class heavy, clientele in the early nineteenth century to a national variety entertainment industry involving purpose-built theatres and thousands of professional entertainers by the century's end.<sup>5</sup> As leisure theatres that operated in equal measure as social spaces, watering holes, and good-time entertainment venues, they were easy targets for moralist and elitist scorn. Music halls were, so the arguments went, vulgar, sinful and, crucially, palaces of low, illegitimate culture. Concerns about what constituted legitimate culture, and its preservation, were shared across the nineteenth century. Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, first published in 1869, is a well-known example of these debates. In the essays that make up his book, Arnold draws attention to the need to preserve culture of quality (high culture) in the face of an increasing number of cultural objects designed for general mass consumption. Famously, Arnold believed that it was the responsibility of 'the great men of culture' 'for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time'.<sup>6</sup> He lamented the prospect of literature or art being cultivated to inform or educate mass audiences, not necessarily as a consequence of a prejudice he held against lower-class people, but because 'good' culture, he believed, was universally relevant. Its value was inherent, and it was the responsibility of those with the capabilities to discern and understand high culture to disseminate it amongst the public.

One breed of Arnold's knowledgeable cultural propagandist was the critic, of which there was no shortage in the nineteenth century. In his account of the rise of the professional critic in Victorian Britain, Barry Faulk draws attention to the way that music halls became

one of the sites of the debate over what constituted legitimate culture. ‘Respectable’ theatre critics such as William Archer, for instance, believing music hall to be an inferior, superficial spectacle, was astounded when it began to receive serious critical attention in the mainstream press, which it did, increasingly, in the late nineteenth century. Writing in 1895, he noted:

At the music hall we can be both vulgar and refined at the same moment. We can enjoy what is low and despicable with an added zest of condescension. [...]

Personally, I have no more objection to it than to any other of the lower human instincts – only I fail to see that it constitutes either a moral virtue or an intellectual distinction.<sup>7</sup>

Archer’s emphasis on ‘moral virtue’ and ‘intellectual distinction’ is revealing. As was common in the nineteenth century, and bearing some influence from Arnold, the critic regarded their task as drawing out of art the lesson, moral or some kind of relatable human value. What could one possibly learn from the dancers, singers and vulgar comedians of the music hall, Archer sincerely wondered? The critic and poet Arthur Symons, however, strongly disagreed with Archer. As a habitual music hall attendee, critic and self-proclaimed ‘aficionado’ of the form, Symons championed the halls in the newspapers and defended their value.<sup>8</sup> In a letter written to the editor of *The Star* newspaper in October 1891, Symons cleverly recycles the language of the hall’s critics into new, positive terms, describing a performance by Katie Lawrence as ‘the most perfectly artistic vulgarity – a true artist, a child of nature’.<sup>9</sup> For Symons and other aesthetically progressive critics, there was genuine artistry (even if sometimes a wild artistry) involved in music hall performances. That artistry and the satisfaction one derived from it was directly linked to its vulgarity – e.g. its raunchy humour, its colour and glitter, its excesses, etc. For Symons, this was not a pleasure derived from one’s feeling of superiority to the act or the performer, but a genuine appreciation of the skill involved in winning over an audience and the generation of a ‘vulgar’ aesthetic.

By the time Archer, Symons and others were debating the inherent cultural value of music hall, and Sickert was painting its performers, it had passed through its marginal adolescence and was maturing into a commercial mass culture form.<sup>10</sup> Various acts of legislation<sup>11</sup> had been passed to help tame and make it acceptable as it commercially expanded, but still public perception about its decency was hard to shift.<sup>12</sup> Evidence of this can be found in the critical reception of Sickert's paintings. The *Pall Mall Gazette*'s review of *Second Turn of Miss Katie Lawrence*, referred to earlier, offers a good example of the prevailing prejudice. While praising Sickert's technique and colouring, the critic laments the choice of subject matter, noting how the 'independent' and 'eccentric' young artist seems to have deliberately departed from respectable 'traditional' subjects and settled on something 'unexpected' and 'astonishing':

Thus the grotesqueness of Mr. Walter Sickert's scene in Gatti's music hall, 'Second Turn of Miss Katie Lawrence', gives the spectator such a shock at entering that he will in all probability not see, much less appreciate, the excellent tone of the harmonious colouring. But Mr. Sickert is evidently such a democratic student of manners that he can see no vulgarity in "the people's" recreation.<sup>13</sup>

While the critic's protest seems primarily directed at 'the people's recreation' as subject matter, he would have also been concerned by the performer's gender. As Tracy Davis has noted, because female performers in the Victorian and Edwardian period occupied male-dominated theatre spaces they were inevitably viewed as sexual commodities.<sup>14</sup> This was even more pronounced for actresses and dancers of less respectable theatre spaces like music halls. Thus, the picture of Lawrence is doubly problematic to the critic as it depicts two 'lowly' forms: the music hall and an eroticised female body. That an earlier Sickert painting, *The Lion Comique* (1887), depicting male music hall performer Fred Albert received critical responses focused not on the nature of its subject but on its colouring and detail, only serves

to verify this point.<sup>15</sup> It was Lawrence's gender combined with the low performance form that fuelled the critics' concern.

Undeterred, and likely mobilised by the controversy, Sickert continued to paint music hall performers, the significant majority of them female.<sup>16</sup> One of the consequences of this was that other artists followed suit and it was soon not uncommon to see popular performances of various kinds (with male and female subjects) appearing in British paintings, a trend that continued into the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> And while the popular arts became acceptable resources and subjects for 'legitimate', fine arts practices like painting, their own status – as low, vulgar and often heavily commercialised forms – did not improve, even if through their commercial taming they became more acceptable as entertainment in the public eye; this was particularly true of female performers like Cunningham, who carried the eroticised stigma associated with her profession with her until her retirement. These imbalances – of symbolic cultural hierarchies that positions one artform as more prestigious and valuable than another, and of a patriarchal social system that consistently held women in inferior positions – has produced staggering gaps in our understanding about what and who artists were capturing in this period. While there is no shortage of scholarly publications and archival holdings on British artists who painted popular acts, the same cannot always be said of the subjects. Indeed, in many cases, an artist's rendering of a popular performer or act may be one of only a few pieces of evidence available to prove they ever existed.

This is certainly the case for Walter Sickert's paintings of Minnie Cunningham. Despite a lengthy and celebrated career as a performer in Britain, very little is known about her today. The inadequate recording of her work began during her own lifetime: in Charles Douglas Stuart's and A.J. Park's *The Variety Stage* (1895), the first important history of music hall to be published, for instance, Cunningham's name is listed at the end of a single chapter alongside Katie Lawrence, Marie Lloyd, Lottie Collins, and over a dozen other

female performers as having ‘won distinction’ with their acts, although the acts themselves are never discussed.<sup>18</sup> The major histories of the music hall that followed may not have shared the same level of gender bias, but Cunningham, if she is acknowledged, typically appears as a footnote.<sup>19</sup> So as we saw with the painting of Lawrence earlier, the misogyny of the historians and critics has further impoverished the historical record as many chose to overlook the contributions of female performers in this period.

So, to better know Cunningham requires an inspection of the limited archival records of her life and work, and a fitting together of various pieces of mostly journalistic treatments of her career. As Cunningham was a successful performer during music hall’s intensive period of commercialisation, and at a time in which the seeds of the modern popular culture celebrity were sewn, unpicking actual facts from ‘*published facts*’ becomes a challenge. Often, to know Cunningham through these documents is to know what she wanted the public to know; that is: to know her as celebrity. I tread carefully through this material and in the section that follows piece together the available information to offer an account of Cunningham’s life and career.

## **II. An Old Hand at Love**

In Sickert’s painting *Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford*, Cunningham appears in black stockings and a crimson-coloured yoke dress with matching hat. She stands with her arms down to her side and faces out across the brass footlights to her audience. While the painting shows Cunningham on stage, a letter from Sickert to Cunningham in 1897 reveals that she posed for the painting in the artist’s studio, then at 53 Glebe Place in London’s Chelsea, by standing on a raised stand he erected for her.<sup>20</sup> The background details of the scene, which is thought to have been London’s Tivoli Theatre, located on the Strand, and not, as the painting’s recent title has suggested, Camden’s Old Bedford music hall, would have been



easily filled in by Sickert as he frequently attended and regularly sketched the interiors of several music halls in London, including these.<sup>21</sup> The original title of the painting, *Miss Minnie Cunningham 'I'm an old hand at love, though I'm young in years'* suggests that Sickert had in mind to depict the performer singing her 1890s hit 'The Art of Making Love', a song she wrote herself.<sup>22</sup> Cunningham would later confide to her friend and admirer Arthur Symons that she was disappointed with the painting as it presented her as 'too tall and thin'.<sup>23</sup>

Minnie Cunningham was born in Birmingham on 15 January 1870 to the music hall performer Ned Cunningham and his wife, Eliza Ann.<sup>24</sup> Ned had established himself as a comic singer and clog dancer in Britain's provincial music halls and by the 1870s was able to secure top billing in major cities. The level of his popularity is suggested in an 1873 review of a performance he gave at Wilton's Music Hall in London, then one of the country's largest and most established halls, where the critic acknowledges that Cunningham's appearance was met – even before performing – with the 'loud applause' of an enthusiastic audience.<sup>25</sup> By 1877, his reputation allowed for him to advertise himself as 'the greatest comic singer and dancer in the world', which he did for an appearance at the Birmingham Concert Hall.<sup>26</sup> But his fame was to be cut short. Sometime around 1880 Cunningham died, of causes that are not now known. While an obituary cannot be found giving a precise date, there is reference to his passing in a review of one of Minnie's earliest performances at the Star Music Hall in Barrow-in-Furness when she was just twelve years old: 'Miss Minnie Cunningham, daughter of the late Ned Cunningham, is exceedingly clever as a song and dance artist'.<sup>27</sup> Next to nothing is known about Cunningham's mother, although there is considerable evidence to suggest she played a role in her daughter's career, serving as a constant guardian, taking responsibility for costumes and helping to manage her appearances.<sup>28</sup> Eliza Ann worked alongside her daughter until her death in 1916.

According to her own account of her career, Cunningham made her professional stage debut at the age of 10. In several press notices and interviews appearing towards the end of the nineteenth century, she would claim that her professional debut took place at the Museum Music Hall in Birmingham in 1880, although no records exist to verify she ever appeared at that venue.<sup>29</sup> The earliest appearances I have found do, however, support her working professionally that year. She appeared at the Star Music Hall in Manchester in November and a month later she performed at the Princess Palace in Leeds.<sup>30</sup> A short time later, in February 1881, her name is given in a review for a twelve-night appearance at the Cavalry Brigade Music Hall in Aldershot, where she is described as ‘the cleverest little lady who has ever appeared [there]’.<sup>31</sup> In an interview she gave to the entertainment journal *The Encore* in 1899, Cunningham noted that her career began after her father’s death. ‘When he was alive he wouldn’t allow me to think of going on the stage’, she recalled.<sup>32</sup> Her earliest music hall appearances saw her perform her father’s material in a male impersonation act. After these early engagements, she primarily worked for little money in provincial theatres playing children’s roles until 1886, although notices indicate she was still, occasionally, performing in music halls, too.<sup>33</sup> Over these years, her act seems to have evolved from male impersonation to that of a female serio-comic and dancer.<sup>34</sup> During this formative period of her career, then, she gradually developed an act that was distinctive to her and not based on the inherited legacy of her father.

Cunningham made her London debut in the mid-1880s. In her interview with *The Encore*, she describes how she had rescued her first performance in the capital from failure, almost by luck.<sup>35</sup> Her London premiere was given, she claimed, in the Middlesex Music Hall, located in the West End, in 1886.<sup>36</sup> She had been told by the management to sing something ‘very lively’ and consequently chose a patter song entitled, ‘Totty, The Nobleman’s Daughter’. The performance ‘went without a hand’, she recalled, leaving her feeling ‘quite

broken-hearted' and regretting her decision to come to London.<sup>37</sup> Rather than give up, she made a quick decision to sing a character ballad entitled, 'The Hurdy-Gurdy Girl', which, to her astonishment, was a resounding success.<sup>38</sup> The interviews leave the impression on the reader that from this moment of clever theatrical rebound, Cunningham's career followed an upward trajectory.<sup>39</sup>

Despite these accounts, which would pass as authoritative until her death, it would appear that Cunningham made her debut in the capital earlier, in 1885, at the South London Palace in Lambeth, some distance from the more prestigious West End halls.<sup>40</sup> She carried on working in London and the Southeast of England performing in Gravesend, Brighton and Greenwich into 1886. It may have been at the Parthenon in Greenwich, rather than the Middlesex, in January that Cunningham's memory of a less assured performance was formed. In *The Era*'s review, she is described as singing her songs in a 'sleepy' and unenergetic manner, while her dancing was critiqued for being too technical and without grace.<sup>41</sup> But she persisted, and by the end of February when she was appearing at the Oxford Theatre of Varieties in Brighton *The Era* records that her songs were heartily appreciated by her audience.<sup>42</sup> While the available evidence suggests Cunningham may have altered the details of her London debut in her publicity, what is apparent is that 1885 and 1886 are years where she actively and rigorously pursued a music hall career. There is a noticeable surge in her productivity in the press at this time with near-weekly appearances in London and the surrounding areas, and, later in the year, in Manchester and Liverpool.<sup>43</sup> In a single year, the sixteen-year-old Cunningham establishes herself as a capable music hall performer and begins to attract attention nationally.

When Minnie Cunningham met Sickert six years later, in 1892, through their mutual friend Symons, the twenty-two-year-old was a well-established performer, known in equal measure for her work in music halls and pantomime. The available reviews of her

performances during this period rarely make specific mention of songs she actually sang, but comment more generally on her skills as a performer. Of a performance given at The Paragon Theatre in Mile End in late January 1892, only weeks before meeting Sickert, *The Era*'s critic noted:

Miss Minnie Cunningham, whose vocal means are somewhat limited, does not commit the common error of forcing her voice. It is, however, by her dancing she captivates her audience. Dressed in a very becoming costume, she looked a winsome little lass on the night out to which we now refer, and enchanted all with as pretty a step dance as can possibly be seen.<sup>44</sup>

That she was a stronger dancer than singer is reconfirmed across many reviews.<sup>45</sup> By her own account, she never received any formal dance training. She had, she insisted, shown natural abilities as a dancer from the age of two.<sup>46</sup> She believed her gifts in this particular field had been passed down to her genetically from her father, although he had apparently refused to teach her.<sup>47</sup> Throughout her career, she appears to have mastered a range of dance styles. As well as the 'pretty step dancing' mentioned above, other reviews make comment on routines which involved high-kicking<sup>48</sup> and her skills as a skirt dancer, where she enthralled audiences by 'manipulating her voluminous skirts with elegance and charm'.<sup>49</sup> This, surely, is the dancing that inspired Arthur Symons' to write 'The Primrose Dance: Tivoli' about Cunningham in 1895. In the poem, Symons describes an enchanting skirt dance where her amber-coloured skirts move in a manner reminiscent of the petals of a flower.<sup>50</sup> In an 1892 review of a performance Cunningham gave at the Tivoli in London, we find yet another style of dance mentioned. Noting her 'delicacy' and overall 'refinement', the critic goes on to explain that the secret to her charm:

[...] is in the elegance of her posture. When she dances, you could 'wish her a wave of the sea' [and] dance forever. She does not depend upon agility nor upon high

kicking; all her efforts are sober and harmonious. Indeed if her dances have a fault, it is in the lack of movement. At several points it is merely a series of small, short steps: an opportunity for striking attitudes.<sup>51</sup>

As well as a range of dance styles, Cunningham's serio-comic act involved singing. In interviews in the 1890s, she noted that her most successful songs included 'Little Maiden all Forlorn', 'The Hurdy-Gurdy Girl', and a revival of one of her father's songs, 'Give us a wag of your tail old dog'. The latter concerns the manner in which people greet each other and includes the lyrics:

Happy young lovers will meet with a kiss,  
Go hugging and squeezing away,  
But there's one little greeting far better than all,  
*Is when you* hear two doggies say  
Give us a wag of your tail, old dog,  
Give us a wag of your tail,  
When you're out in the street  
And you see two dogs meet,  
*They say give us a wag of your tail.*<sup>52</sup>

Other songs Cunningham is known to have sung include: the self-authored 'Did You Ever See a Feather in a Tom-Cat's Tail?', a playful song about dismissing the tales of boastful people; similarly, 'The Hen that Cackles', written for her by popular music hall composer Richard Morton, effectively offers the same advice but uses the metaphor of a chicken laying eggs. 'Looking at the Pictures', a song written by Frank Leo, tells the story of a young woman who loses her brother to war; and 'You Can't Judge Cigars by the Picture on the Box', also composed by Cunningham, humorously warns of making judgements based on appearance.<sup>53</sup> Out of all her songs, 'The Art of Making Love', the song Sickert recalled in the

original title of his painting, appears to be the biggest musical success she had in her career. This is reconfirmed in available press from the period.<sup>54</sup> Taken together, these songs indicate something of a range, from the comic to the more serious. Although, a survey of her available music reveals there seem to be significantly more comic songs in her repertoire than serious ones. This is something also picked up on by critics who frequently noted in their reviews that her song choices often seemed rather silly.<sup>55</sup> But ‘silly’ seems to have been strategic. As Cunningham herself noted in an interview: ‘it’s nearly always the silly songs that [...] get there. I have a lot of good songs that never get a hand’.<sup>56</sup> But as with her dancing, what the available sheet music tells us is that Cunningham’s repertoire was diverse. That she could make an audience laugh and cry within a single turn was no doubt part of what made her popular with audiences.

For a large portion of her career, Cunningham’s act appears to have included playing a character modelled on a schoolgirl.<sup>57</sup> This is captured in Sickert’s painting: the yoke dress, black stockings and bonnet was a common outfit for girls in this period. A few photographs that appear on the covers of published sheet music help reconfirm this (see Fig.2). Reviewing the available (silly) songs and reviews of her performances suggests that Cunningham’s act likely consisted of offering grown-up, often humorous advice ‘innocently’ through the figure of a schoolgirl; this contrast – between apparently naïve young lady and adult content – was likely the foundation for the humour of her performance. Given that she started to perform at such a young age, a schoolgirl act certainly would have been age appropriate (for a while). However, the creation of a schoolgirl character may have also been tactical. Davis has written about how actresses and schoolgirls were popular figures in Victorian pornography, which meant that performances depicting schoolgirls in music halls and theatres (already sexually charged spaces) could be read as especially erotic.<sup>58</sup> Cunningham and the many others who performed similar acts (the schoolgirl was a common music hall character in this period)

would have capitalised on this, performing what Bailey has referred to as *knowingness*, ‘the technique of hints and silences that left the audience to fill in the gaps and complete the circuit of meaning’.<sup>59</sup> Taken at face value, however, double entendre lyrics or jokes could be interpreted literally and defended as morally wholesome if questions over decadency were raised. So, this wink-wink knowingness and performed innocence licensed sexual readings of the performer and their act, as well as providing protection, when required, against accusations of lewdness. In Cunningham’s case, it is not difficult to locate evidence that her act was successful in attracting male attention: both Symons and Sickert, for instance, adored her and their writings reveal that their interest in her was not exclusively professional. Sickert’s adoration for Cunningham led him to write what is believed to be his only poem, in which he refers to her as his ‘serio-comic sweetheart’.<sup>60</sup> That he chose to paint her in character as a schoolgirl is also rather telling about his feelings toward the performer.

It is unclear at what point the act changes, but any aging performer would need to eventually modify their performance to better suit the age they appeared to be. In Cunningham’s case, we find around the turn of the twentieth-century she begins to incorporate more specifically Irish material into her act.<sup>61</sup> This would have included the Richard Morton-composed serenade ‘Bridget and Mike’, about a comic courtship, featuring lyrics such as: ‘Arrah now, Bridget, Never ye fidget, Faithful and true to ye, darlin’ I’ll be [...]’.<sup>62</sup> This act seems to have gained in popularity for it is not long before she begins to bill herself as an ‘Irish Comedienne’ and, later, as ‘The Little Irish Gem’ instead of a ‘serio-comic’.<sup>63</sup> By 1914, at the age of forty-four, she is advertising herself as a ‘refined Irish comedienne’.<sup>64</sup> Although there’s no way to be certain about how specifically her performance evolves, it is likely that her act remained rather close to the standard serio-comic formula: the occasional incorporation of a character, a mix of mostly comic but also sentimental songs, dancing, and the telling of jokes and stories. The specifically Irish

direction her act takes in the twentieth century could be explained by a number of factors. As is already known, Cunningham seemed to excel at playing characters; and performing a convincing and entertaining Irish character was certainly within her skillset. Given the increase in advertisements of engagements in Ireland between 1900 and 1917, and the positive notices she received for these, one can speculate with confidence that this act proved popular with Irish audiences. She would have sensibly taken advantage of this popularity by making Ireland the focus of her business – a sensible move given that demand for her work in London appears to have slowed. And she was not alone in appealing to the Irish market. As Russell has pointed out in his history of British popular music, many writers and popular singers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced Irish-themed material – almost to the point of exploitation.<sup>65</sup> Cunningham's act therefore appears to have tapped into and sought to capitalise on this trend.

In addition to music hall, Cunningham, like other artistes, took theatre work when it came available, most often in pantomime.<sup>66</sup> Pantomime was lucrative for celebrities like Cunningham and provided, for a short time, stable work at one venue. This was in contrast to her music hall work where she might need to perform in up to three venues in a single evening across several nights a week to secure a good salary.<sup>67</sup> Depending on location and venue, Cunningham's salary would likely have varied between £10 and £30 per week, which was an admirable salary for anyone during this period, but especially for a single woman.<sup>68</sup> It is known with certainty that she was commanding £18 per week in Dublin in 1895 when she was performing at the Star Theatre of Varieties.<sup>69</sup> Just over a decade later, for her role as the principal boy in *Jack and Jill* at the Belfast Empire in 1908 – a role she eventually withdrew from – she was contracted for £15 per week for rehearsals and £30 per week for the run of the performance.<sup>70</sup> These figures also help to better understand the scale of Cunningham's fame. In way of comparison, Marie Lloyd – whose fame stretched well beyond British shores to



America, Australia and South Africa – could secure contracts of £80 per week for regular music hall appearances and considerably more for tours abroad.<sup>71</sup>

Cunningham did not achieve international prominence on the same scale as Lloyd or other music hall peers like Vesta Victoria and Vesta Tilley, although there certainly was international interest in her. Her singular time abroad was spent in America from August 1890 to June 1891.<sup>72</sup> She spent the first part of that year performing with Ted Marks' International Vaudevilles company, alongside Charles Chaplin Sr. (Charlie Chaplin's father) and other entertainers.<sup>73</sup> Her second engagement, in the spring of 1891, was as one of the leads in Mark Murphy's musical farce *O'Dowd's Neighbors*.<sup>74</sup> Despite her productive year, there are no records of any future engagements in America. She was offered the opportunity to perform in Australia on two occasions, but declined both.<sup>75</sup> The reasons for her declining opportunities that could have catapulted her to higher stardom are unclear. Regarding America, she said that while she enjoyed her time there and would very much like to return, 'I am a little home bird and am very happy where I am'.<sup>76</sup> Later, in the same interview, when explaining why she turned down the opportunity to perform in Australia, she claims that her 'London engagements forbade'.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps her management saw greater opportunities in Britain, although looking at the fees offered to music halls stars of equivalent calibre for international engagements, it seems unlikely they would not have been keen for her to take these offers.

When Cunningham met Sickert in 1892, she was not long returned from America and was at the height of her fame. In that year, she secured major engagements at London's Oxford, Tivoli, Canterbury and Pavilion music halls – some of the most reputable in existence at that time. But from these high points, her career suddenly seems to plateau. She maintains her fame on a national level, but there are no records of any major musical successes, celebrated tours abroad, or even celebrity marriages (or scandals) that might have

enhanced her public profile. But the press records – primarily advertisements for appearances – indicate that she continued to work consistently until the end of 1916. On 7 June of that year, her mother died of meningitis at the home they shared at 84 Southgate Road in Hackney.<sup>78</sup> Following this, reports begin to appear suggesting that she was missing performances due to ill health. When she does perform again, at the Empire Theatre in Belfast that December, *The Era* notes that the ‘accomplished comedian [was] as successful as ever’.<sup>79</sup> After this, the press trail goes cold. Her obituary, which appeared in the weekly entertainment journal *The Performer* on 27 January 1954, repeats the same information from her 1890s interviews. It explains how the deceased 84-year-old former star had made her stage debut at age 10 in Birmingham, her London debut at the Middlesex in 1886, she had a hit with the song ‘The Hurdy-Gurdy Girl’, and that she had once toured America.<sup>80</sup> This seems to support my observation that her career peaked in the 1890s. A notice appearing in the same journal a week later indicates that Cunningham was buried in the Roman Catholic Cemetery at Kensal Green in London on 26 January.<sup>81</sup> I have found no other notices about her death in mainstream British newspapers.

If Cunningham did retire from performing in 1916, as the lack of press notices indicate, she still would have managed a thirty-six-year career as a performer. While she had many admirers, she never married, nor did she have any children. The consistent presence throughout much of her life was her mother and one wonders whether she had a stronger hand in steering the course of her daughter’s career than records can currently verify.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps it was due to her grief that Cunningham left the stage soon after her mother’s passing, but it may have also been that without her mother there to help manage her career, she simply could not continue. But it is also likely that economic and political factors contributed to her decision to retire. Given the Irish focus of her work in the 1910s, one wonders whether her ability to perform as a comic in the tense climate of the Irish Home

Rule crisis (1912-1922) became increasingly difficult, and with few opportunities opening up in major cities elsewhere as music hall's popularity began to slow, she had little choice but to retire.<sup>83</sup> What she does with her time between 1916 and 1954 is a mystery. All that can be written with any assurance is that she remained a resident of Southgate Road in Hackney, moving from 84 to 74 at some point after her mother's passing.<sup>84</sup>

Long after she stopped performing, her name would still occasionally appear in the press, typically in articles reminiscing about the past. Writing in the *Belfast Telegraph* in 1944, the writer St. John Ervine would ask readers if they could remember the comedienne Minnie Cunningham, about whom Belfast was once 'daft'.<sup>85</sup> He recalled performances in which her songs 'caused, strong but not silent, Islandmen to shed salt tears'.<sup>86</sup> Another article, published in 1950, explained how protective shipyard workers were of their favourite star. When a local music hall manager put another performer at the top of the bill in Minnie's place, the workers arrived at the theatre armed with glass bottles, which they threw at the stage to scare the rival star.<sup>87</sup> What these accounts and the wider record tells us is that Cunningham was someone who made an impression on the public and that she was held in popular memory long after her celebrity status had expired.

### **III. Cultural Remembering and Forgetfulness**

Returning to Arnold's call for 'the great men of culture' to champion and disseminate the best knowledge and art of their time to the wider public, it can be seen in the cases of Sickert and Cunningham how this plays out and the impact this has on the preservation of artistic practices.<sup>88</sup> The 'serious' artist, Sickert, was highly regarded by a critical elite during and after his lifetime. Since his death in 1942, there have been approximately seventy major international exhibitions featuring his work and well over two-hundred studies published about him.<sup>89</sup> His popularity as a leading British modernist has been very firmly established and maintained in an absolutely Arnoldian fashion. As has been noted, the same efforts to

save, record and disseminate are rarely available to the popular performer. The same discourses that establish artists like Sickert as culturally significant are the very same that seek to subtract value from and subordinate the popular. This is an idea expressed by art historian and critic T.J. Clark in his influential book *The Painting of Modern Life*, in which he makes reference to the appropriation of popular imagery in art in the nineteenth century as an act of domination over the working-classes and their culture.<sup>90</sup> In drawing on popular forms, he argues, artists became involved in ‘making the idioms part of a further system, in which the popular was expropriated from those who produced it – made over into a separate realm of images which were given back, duly refurbished, to the ‘people’ thus *safely* defined’.<sup>91</sup> In the visual record of music hall left to us by artists like Sickert we are not left with access to the meanings produced by those who performed or consumed music hall performances at the time – as those meanings, as discussed earlier, might involve vulgarity, sentimentality or a kind of naïve simplicity. Instead, we find a representation of the stage event that eliminates these features and renders the scene in a sophisticated ‘modern’ style which is better suited to middle-class consumption. So, the act depicted, and its audience, are symbolically tamed and made ‘acceptable’ through an act of aesthetic transformation. The class-based associations/dominations here also contribute to the problem of recording and disseminating artistic practices. The selective audiences who looked at, wrote about, and curated Sickert’s art did so as part of an intellectual project – the middle-class professional critic’s and scholar’s social position enabling them to both understand and appreciate the artwork and champion its artist. For the most part, Cunningham’s audience, a mix of middle and working-class spectators, would have looked upon such a task very differently. Firstly, any working-class admirers who may have wished to preserve and propagate the career of their favourite performer may have lacked the skill, time or know-how to even approach such a task. Secondly, there was little context for this kind of preservation: documenting, critically

assessing or attempting to archive her performance in a similar manner to that of a ‘serious’ artist would have been thought for the most part ridiculous (one is reminded here of Archer, discussed earlier). Cunningham was leisure; she was a bit of fun; she was not to be taken too seriously. While evidence of her career exists – as this article demonstrates – the historical record is very seriously unbalanced. And as I noted in the first section, I believe this was compounded in Cunningham’s case by her gender and the misogyny of the few early recorders of music hall performance. Leaving her out of these histories has resulted in perpetual neglect.

Writing about the popularity of Cunningham’s music hall colleague Marie Lloyd in their book *The Popular Arts*, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel explain that popular performers become popular in part by creating a community with their audiences; and in doing so, they become a kind of ‘stand in’ for them.<sup>92</sup> Once accepted into this privileged position, the popular performer becomes a mouthpiece for and an expression of her and her audience-community’s ‘shared’ values, tastes and experiences.<sup>93</sup> Such encounters in the context of music hall (and many other historical popular performance forms) were primarily generated live in the moment of performance: the rapport established with the audience; through the performance of songs or stories that speak to shared experiences; through the spectacle and magic of charisma; etc. Once an audience was won over, the performer’s popularity could then be reinforced through subsequent live encounters and expanded by being included in an audience’s daily life through commercial objects, which in Cunningham’s case would have consisted of published sheet music and professional photographs. Continued contact between the artist and her audience-community was therefore essential to the maintenance of this relationship and, subsequently, to the performer’s popularity.<sup>94</sup> But, of course, audiences are rarely exclusive in their popular alliances, and new performers can easily be added to or replace another in an individual’s personal cultural repertoire. This, and constantly evolving

tastes and values, as well as the passing of time more generally, mean that inevitably a performers' popularity is finite. They will eventually fade from the popular memory. Available records indicate that Cunningham's relationship with her audience-community came to an end in 1917 and from that moment she would have soon started to see her own popularity fade. By the time of her death, she had pretty much been forgotten.

So, to return to my opening question: how is it that two successful artistic figures could be remembered so differently? The answer rests in the culturally-defined attitudes about the disparate artistic fields that each of these artists worked in. As a respectable producer of 'high culture', Sickert's work was and continues to be championed by a network of knowledgeable cultural gatekeepers. Having been deemed significant by those with the power to make such distinctions (e.g. the professional critic, the gallerist, the educated art connoisseur), great efforts have been made to save, protect, and understand his work and the impact his practice has had on modern British art. Rarely have such efforts been made with the makers of low-culture, like Cunningham. Cunningham's relevance as a popular artist was restricted primarily to the period in which she remained an active performer and could continue to reassert her relevance to her audiences. When she was no longer able to do this, she quickly faded from the popular imagination. While I believe there remains much to question about Sickert's interest in Cunningham, his paintings of her, captured at the height of her fame, are the most high-profile and accessible remains of Minnie Cunningham today. And in this regard, they are a valuable resource and visual record of a historical popular performer we can come to know again.

## List of Figures

**Figure 1:** Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942), *Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford*, 1892. London, Tate Britain. Oil paint on canvas, 76.5 x 63.8 cm.

**Figure 2:** Minnie Cunningham (1870-1954), The cover page for *Dance for Pianoforte*, n.d. Sheet music. London, British Library.

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<sup>1</sup> Also produced in this sitting was a smaller oil painting, simply titled *Minnie Cunningham*, and four drawings. The details of the drawings can be found in Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the water colourist Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), produced a series of drawings of theatre interiors dating back to the late eighteenth century, and Sickert's own tutor, James Whistler, the American painter living in Britain, had already by the 1870s begun painting famous stage performers. See, for instance, Whistler's *Arrangement in Black, No. 3: Sir Henry Irving as Phillip II of Spain* (1876).

<sup>3</sup> 'New English Art Club,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 April 1888, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Some aspects of this debate can be found in the following: 'The Gospel of Impressionism,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 July 1890, p. 1; 'Picture Subjects,' *The Globe and Traveller*, 26 April 1889, p. 1; and The Bohemian, 'Art for the People,' *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 6 July 1889, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> There are many useful accounts of music hall's development available. Those I have drawn on for this study include (chronologically): Charles Douglas Stuart and A.J. Park, *The Variety Stage: A History of the Music Halls from the Earliest to the Present Time* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895); Archibald Haddon, *The Story of Music Hall* (London: Fleetway Press, Ltd., 1935); Willson Disher, *Winkles and Champagne* (Bath: Cedric Chivers, 1938); Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *British Music Hall* (London: Studio Vista., 1965); Peter Honri, *Working the Halls* (Farnborough: Hampshire, 1973); D.F. Cheshire, *Music Hall in Britain* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1974); Roy Busby, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated Who's Who from 1850 to the Present Day* (London: Paul Elek, 1976); Peter Bailey, *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); J.S. Bratton, *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Richard Anthony Baker, *British Music Hall* (Barnsley, Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 1988); Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* (London: Routledge, 1991); Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan, *The Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) David Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); and Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford World Books, 2006), p. 53.



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<sup>7</sup> William Archer, 'Theatre and Music Hall', in *The Theatrical 'World' of 1895* (London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1896) pp. 96-103, p.102

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Symons, 'To the Editor of the Star,' in Karl Beckson and John M. Munroe (eds) *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1989), pp. 85-87, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Symons, 'To the Editor of the Star', p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> As part of this shift, music hall advertising became more sophisticated; and many venues underwent significant remodelling to make them more opulent and accommodating of a more genteel clientele.

As Peter Bailey has written, by the 1890s the music hall was clearly a capitalist operation; 'music hall capitalism for much of this period was capitalism with a beaming human face [...]'. See: Peter Bailey, 'Custom, Capital and Culture in the Victorian Music Hall,' in Robert D. Storch (ed.) *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 180-208, p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, for instance, meant that justices of the peace and the Lord Chamberlain became responsible for granting permission to perform theatrical texts, which would affect both music halls and circuses who attempted to put on pantomimes. Other legislative difficulties, including the Law of Theatres and Music-Halls of 1885 which required music halls to obtain licenses, are detailed in Cheshire, p. 92-96.

<sup>12</sup> As the famous case of Laura Ormiston Chant and the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square in 1894 proves. See Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 75-110 for an account of Chant and her battle with the Empire over the venue's tolerance of prostitutes.

<sup>13</sup> 'New English Art Club,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 April 1888, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Baron, p. 163.

<sup>16</sup> Between 1887 and 1892, Sickert would paint popular performers Ada Lundberg, Queenie Lawrence, Dot Hetherington, the Sisters Lloyd, Vesta Victoria among others. See Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, pp. 162-187 and pp. 208-215 for a comprehensive overview.

<sup>17</sup> In this category of British art, one finds work by Michael Ayrton; David Bomberg; J.D. Ferguson; David Gommon; Duncan Grant; Spencer Gore; Gerald Kelly; Thérèse Lessore; Laura Knight, among many others, depicting scenes from the circus, music halls, or other popular entertainments from this period.

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart and Park, p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> Haddon (1935), Disher (1938), Mitchenson and Mander (1965), Honri (1973), Cheshire (1974), and Busby (1976), for instance, do not include Cunningham in their accounts of the music hall at all, though most include references to some of her female colleagues, Marie Lloyd, Vesta Victoria and, less frequently, Katie Lawrence. Baker (1988) mentions Cunningham once but focuses rather sensationally on modern rumours about Sickert being the Victorian serial killer Jack the Ripper. See Baker, p. 183.

<sup>20</sup> The letter referenced here is quoted in Baron, p. 208. We know that the date was in the spring, and most likely in May, because Symons mentions in a letter on 25 May 1892 that he was glad to hear that Cunningham had finally ‘done his bidding and given a sitting to Sickert’. See: Arthur Symons, ‘To Ernest Rhys [Letter]’, in Karl Beckson and John M. Munroe (eds), *Arthur Symons, Selected Letters, 1880-1935*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1989), pp. 95-96, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Upstone, ‘Walter Richard Sickert, Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford,’ (2009) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter-richard-sickert-minnie-cunningham-r1139296>. Accessed 29 November 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Baron, p. 208.

<sup>23</sup> Symons, ‘To Ernest Rhys’, p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> We know the actual date of her birthday because both *The Era* and *The Stage* usually included Cunningham in their weekly birthday greetings column. On her death certificate, dated 21 January 1954, she was listed as 84 years old. See ‘Minnie Cunningham,’ Death Certificate (London: Register Office, Hackney, 21 January 1954).

<sup>25</sup> ‘London Music Halls,’ *Entre’ Act*, 2 August 1873, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Birmingham Concert Hall [advertisement],’ *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*, 3 February 1877, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Star Music Hall,’ *Era*, 1 September 1883, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Abbreviated Skirts: Belfast Pantomime Sequel,’ *Northern Whig*, 7 May 1909, p. 12. An opaque reference to Cunningham’s mother also appears in a letter Symons wrote to his friend Ernest Rhys on 17 February 1892, when he describes her as ‘very pretty, very nice, very young and has a Mamma’. See Symons, ‘To Ernest Rhys’, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Footlight Gossip,’ *Illustrated Police Budget*, 15 April 1899, p. 14.

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<sup>30</sup> For the Manchester engagement, see: 'Manchester Star Music Hall [advertisement],' *Era*, 14

November 1880, p. 22. For Leeds, see: 'Princess Palace [advertisement],' *Era*, 16 December 1880, p.

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<sup>31</sup> 'Aldershot Cavalry Brigade Music Hall [advertisement],' *Era*, 26 February 1881, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> 'Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham,' *Encore*, 2 February 1899, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Advertisements and reviews support some of this narrative. For instance, in 1884, Cunningham was appearing as the Fairy King in the pantomime *Dick Whittington and His Wonderful Cat* at the Theatre Royale in Birkenhead. See 'Provincial Theatricals,' *Era*, 5 January 1884, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> A serio-comic typically delivered humorous monologues, sang and danced. Their musical repertoire varied, but could range from serious ballads to comic songs. Songs were often situation-based, telling stories often about domestic and/or working life.

<sup>35</sup> The story of her London debut is repeated in press interviews, press profiles and even her own obituary.

<sup>36</sup> 'Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham,' *Encore*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> As the 'interviewer' acknowledges in each of these very staged interviews, following that moment Cunningham became a 'universal favourite'. See 'Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham,' *Encore*, p. 9 and 'Chats with Celebrities: Miss Minnie Cunningham,' *Encore*, 27 October 1893, n.p.

<sup>40</sup> 'South London Palace,' *Sporting Life*, 14 December 1885, p. 1

<sup>41</sup> 'Parthenon, Greenwich,' *Era*, 16 January 1886, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> 'Oxford Palace of Varieties,' *Era*, 27 February 1886, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> She appears at the Folly Variety Theatre in Manchester in October 1886 and is back there again in December, and in Liverpool at the Bijou Opera House in November where it is noted in the *Liverpool Mercury* that she enjoyed 'a good share of applause for the charming way she sang'. See 'Bijou Opera House,' *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 November 1886, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Paragon,' *Era*, 30 January 1892, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> For example: 'Minnie Cunningham charms everybody with her graceful and clever dancing'; see 'Manchester – The Palace,' *Music Hall and Theatre Review*, 7 December 1894, p. 17. And again:

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‘Miss Minnie Cunningham is not a powerful vocalist, but her dancing is the very essence of grace, and she prospers exceedingly well’. See ‘The Paragon,’ *Era*, 2 January 1892, p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Chats with Celebrities: Miss Minnie Cunningham,’ *Encore*, n.p.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Sometimes high kicking appeared in numbers that may not have always worked for the act. For instance, in a review of a performance given in Islington in 1889, it is noted that Cunningham ‘in an “all-forlorn” song, expressed her emotion by considerable high kicking’. See: ‘Dramatic & Musical Gossip,’ *The Referee*, 18 August 1889, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Miss Minnie Cunningham,’ *The Music Hall*, April 1892, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘The Primrose Dance: Tivoli,’ *London Nights* (London: Leonard C. Smithers, 1895), p. 22

<sup>51</sup> Roderick Random, ‘The Diary of an Idler,’ *The Watford Observer*, 3 December 1892, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Italics in original. Harry Lynn, *Give Us a Wag of Your Tail Old Dog*, arranged by Bertram Isaacson (London: Bertram Isaacson Pianoforte and Music Rooms, n.d.).

<sup>53</sup> Other songs she is known to have performed include: ‘Don’t Make a Mountain Out of a Molehill’, ‘Castles in the Air’, ‘Friends’, ‘He Lives in a World of His Own’, ‘I’ve Got a Beau!’, and ‘Just a Girl!’

<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, ‘Miss Minnie Cunningham,’ *Music Hall and Theatre Review*, April 1892, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> Indeed, one critic in an otherwise positive review of a performance Cunningham gave in 1892 wrote that, in general, ‘her songs are rather stupid’. See Random, ‘The Diary of an Idler’, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham,’ *Encore*, 2 February 1899, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Upstone, ‘Walter Richard Sickert, Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford,’ n.p. She is performing as a comic schoolgirl as early as 1886, for it is mentioned in a review appearing in *The Era*: ‘That she is not wanting in spirit and brightness became evident in her school-girl song “I Won’t” [...]’. See ‘Parthenon, Greenwich,’ *The Era*, 16 January 1886, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 119.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘Naughty but nice’: musical comedy and the rhetoric of the girl, 1892-1914,’ in Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan, eds., *The Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 36-60, p. 48.

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<sup>60</sup> For the full poem, see Anna Gruetzner Robins, 'Sickert "Painter-in-Ordinary" to the Music-Hall', *Sickert: Paintings* (London: Royal Academy of Art, 1992), pp. 19-20.

<sup>61</sup> See 'Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham', *Encore*, 2 February 1899, p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Morton, 'Bridget and Mike', London: Francis, Day and Hunter, 1899.

<sup>63</sup> See 'Empire', *The Northern Whig*, 14 August 1907, p. 1.; and 'Her Majesty's Theatre of Varieties', *The Walsall Advertiser*, 8 September 1906, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> 'Empire Theatre [advertisement]', *Dublin Daily Express*, 9 November 1914, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Russell notes that much of the material produced exploited rural Irish and working-class hardships. Russell, *Popular Music in England*, p. 128.

<sup>66</sup> In a feature appearing in *The Music Hall & Theatre Review*, it is noted that by the time Cunningham met Sickert, she had already appeared in several pantomimes, including *Bluebeard and Mother Goose* in Manchester; *Bluebeard* in Birmingham; and she played the part of the principal boy in *Aladdin* in Brighton in 1890. See 'Miss Minnie Cunningham', *The Music Hall & Theatre Review*, 9 April 1892, p. 8. She continues to play in pantomime until her retirement.

<sup>67</sup> This was common practice for music hall stars, particularly in the 1890s. In way of example: in one evening in April 1894, Katie Lawrence – one of Cunningham's colleagues and another of Sickert's music hall subjects – was appearing in three venues: the Eastern Empire at 8.45pm; the Cambridge at 9.30pm; and Gatti's (at Charing Cross Road) at 10.30 See: 'Katie Lawrence [advertisement]', *Music Hall and Theatre Review*, 13 April 1894, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> This is an estimate based on (1) her known earnings from two Irish engagements and (2) the earning figures known for Marie Lloyd, another music hall celebrity who, in 1890, was comparable to Cunningham. But Lloyd's wages skyrocketed after 1891 to upward of £80 per week. Cunningham is unlikely to have achieved such high sums.

<sup>69</sup> Eugene Watters and Matthew Murtagh, *Infinite Variety: Dan Lowrey's Music Hall, 1879-1897* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), p. 154.

<sup>70</sup> She withdrew, allegedly, because of the length of a skirt she was to be forced to wear, although later in court it emerged that she may have been upset with the management for making her share the bill with a rival, Dorothy Ward. See 'Abbreviated Skirts: Belfast Pantomime Sequel,' p. 12. The article also includes information pertaining to her fees.

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<sup>71</sup> Baker, p. 107. Baker also notes that she was contracted for £250 per week for an Australian engagement in 1901; and \$1750 per week for an American engagement in 1913 (Baker, p. 87 and 124).

<sup>72</sup> These dates are confirmed in press accounts. See 'Bank Holiday Attractions,' *Entr'Acte*, 2 August 1890, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> The tour of *O'Dowd's Neighbors* began in the spring of 1891. Written and starring Murphy, the performance contained a loose plot about a neighborhood of Irish residents organised around gags and musical numbers. See Gerald Bordman and Richard Norton, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 125. By August 1891, Cunningham is back in England, at Chatham, at the Gaiety Theatre of Varieties. See 'Gaiety Theatre of Varieties,' *Chatham News*, 29 August 1891, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> The first invitation was for a twelve-month tour starting in March 1892. (See Harry Rickards 'Letter to Miss Cunningham,' Peter Charlton Private Collection, 9 January 1892.) She declined the opportunity and gave it to her colleague Alice Leamar instead (Miss Minnie Cunningham,' *Music Hall and Theatre Review*, April 1892, p. 8). Later, she claims to have been invited to play the role of the French Girl in the musical comedy *The Belle of New York* when it was set to tour Australia, but she turned that down as well ('Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham', *Encore*, p. 9.)

<sup>76</sup> 'Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham', *Encore*, p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> 'Eliza Ann Cunningham,' Death Certificate (London: Register Office, Hackney, 8 June 1916).

<sup>79</sup> 'Belfast,' *Era*, 13 December 1916, p. 9.

<sup>80</sup> 'Death of Minnie Cunningham,' *The Performer*, 28 January 1954, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> 'The Late Minnie Cunningham,' *The Performer*, 4 February 1954, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Her mother is mentioned as accompanying her daughter in the press. She was even in attendance at the interview given to *The Encore* (1899) which has been frequently cited throughout this article. At the end of the interview, the interviewer notes: 'Here, with a smiling *au revoir*, she vanished with her mother, who was present with her on a former occasion when THE ENCORE had the pleasure of an interview some four years ago'. See 'Music-Hall Celebrities: Minnie Cunningham', *Encore*, p. 9.

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<sup>83</sup> The Irish Home Rule crisis began in 1912 with the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in the British Parliament, which would grant powers of self-governance to Ireland, and would end in 1923 when Ireland was declared a republic following the Irish War for Independence (1919-1922).

<sup>84</sup> That she moved homes can be seen on her death certificate. See 'Minnie Cunningham,' Death Certificate (London: Register Office, Hackney, 21 January 1954).

<sup>85</sup> St John Ervine, 'Man Who Set Belfast People Singing,' *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 July 1944, p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ross's Belfast, 'Musings of a Mineral Water Manufacturer,' *Belfast News-Letter*, 15 December 1950, p. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 53.

<sup>89</sup> See Baron, 2006, pp. 563-565 and pp. 567-568.

<sup>90</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 230.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (London: Hutchinson Educational, 1964), p. 56.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> This would still be true now, even if the live element is no longer necessary. Indeed, it could be argued that this on some level has reversed: most popular performers become known primarily through mediated contact with their audiences through film, TV or recorded music, and live encounters – like concerts – serve to reinforce and expand their popularity.